

# On Being a Mormon Woman

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LAST WEEKEND, I TRAVELED TO CALIFORNIA to attend the graduation of my youngest child and only daughter, Megan, from UC Berkeley. She graduated with honors in sociology, a true personal triumph for her. Also graduating was her sociology buddy and friend, Sara. As the girls and I were walking around San Francisco one day, Sara told me that Megan had described to her my struggles with feminism in the Mormon church. She asked me to tell her about it. I'm afraid I failed the missionary test right then and there, for I told her what I am about to tell you.

First let me say that in my personal journey through Mormon culture as a woman, I have reached a point where my sense of being a woman is now almost completely separate from my Mormonism. I see myself not so much as a Mormon woman, but rather as a woman who happens to be a Mormon. In fact, for many years now, my being a Mormon has conflicted with my being a woman. It has been a difficult road to walk, and I sometimes wonder why I continue to live in such tension.

My daughter Megan's life story makes a good framework for my experience. She is 22. When I was her age, I was still a Mormon princess, born of good bloodlines and dedicated to living a Mormon life. I went to college at Stanford, starting in 1966 and graduating as a married student in 1971. I came there fresh from a life in Utah—but everything changed for me after the first quarter at Stanford. Gene England, a member of the bishopric of the Stanford student ward, was just starting *Dialogue*. The country was ramping up the war in Viet Nam while it roiled in the midst of the civil rights movement at home. During that fall quarter, the church knocked down the Coalville, Utah Tabernacle, a beautiful old pioneer building, in the middle of the night to forestall anticipated protests by the citizens of that small town. I returned home to Utah at Christmas to tell friends and family that I wasn't so sure about this war in Viet Nam, that I was angry that the church would destroy rather than preserve its pioneer heritage—and why couldn't we give blacks the priesthood? My father became upset, and my Utah friends promptly labeled me a "California Mormon." That was the beginning of a path I have never turned from since, the path of asking uncomfortable questions.

It was the ERA ratification fight during the late 1970s and early 1980s that made me identify myself as a feminist. Along with my good friend Deedee (who, when we get that taken care of, should definitely be the first woman bishop), I watched in horror from California as the organized and covert machinations of the Relief Society worked to defeat the amendment in other states. We retreated to work in the Primary to get away from the anti-ERA rhetoric, calling ourselves "Relief Society Boat People." Deedee still has her button proclaiming, "Another Mormon for ERA."

It was at this time, in 1980, after three sons, that Megan made her entrance into my family. Her birth was one of the high points of my entire life—I hadn't wanted to believe that God would let me go through life without a daughter! He didn't let me down. When Megan was just a few months old, Deedee and I took her to hear Sonja Johnson speak—a true feminist infant baptism if ever there was one. Megan's birth changed all my feelings about baby blessings. I had been willing enough to see my sons blessed in the traditional fashion, but I resisted the idea of handing this precious woman child to a group of men to pronounce over her their ideas of what her woman's life would be. After delaying the blessing for months, arguing that if non-member fathers could stand in the circle, then temple-endowed mothers surely should be able to do so also, I lost the battle. In addition to my husband's giving her a father's blessing on Fast Sunday, I gave Megan a mother's blessing at home, surrounded by women.

In 1984, not long after Megan's birth, I had one of the shining epiphanies in my history as a Mormon woman. Margaret Toscano's first paper at Sunstone, entitled, "The Missing Rib—the Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in Zion," detailed all the evidence from early church history that women were intended by Joseph Smith to function in a priesthood role. The paper was such a sensation that she presented it a second time during the lunch hour, so more people could hear it. That paper changed every paradigm for me. I have never been the same since I heard it presented. I came away aflame with hope for the future of Mormon women and with a clear vision for the future. Other churches were ordaining women to the priesthood out of a simple sense of fairness and equity while our church had *solid historical reason and evidence* to support such a policy! No other church had such a legacy! All we had to do was to make sure everyone understood, and a change would certainly be almost automatic! I threw myself into the effort, not as a writer, but as a doer. I asked uncomfortable questions, I joined in women's causes, I started a women's discussion group, I objected, I gained a reputation.

And now, 22 years later, after a divorce, nine years as a single mom, building a career, and happily re-marrying, I watch that little baby who was Megan, now grown to beautiful womanhood, graduate from Berkeley. And her friend Sara asks me how it is to be a Mormon woman.

I'm afraid I told Sara that the fight for women's equality in the Mormon church is over. Our efforts to change the institution have been almost fruitless. We haven't changed a thing; in fact, women's official status in the church is worse now than in the 60s and early 70s when we started. We have no hope left. Our leaders have given up and dropped out or been subjected to church discipline or otherwise driven away. There is no one to take our place in the struggle because our daughters have seen the situation for what it is and simply opted out. The patriarchy has won, and Mormon women are now pretty much defined by male Mormon leaders.

Sara asked me how I felt about Megan not taking the torch from me and carrying on in the church. I told her that I understood why Megan had left the church. How could a young woman with ambition, intelligence, and grit allow herself to be confined in the narrow little box that is now prescribed? In her shoes, I would do the same thing. The difference between Megan and me is that I was born into a different church before the battle lines were so completely drawn and the issues so hopelessly polarized. I told Sara that I could see why Megan would not want to be part of an organization that is far more conservative than she is and where everything irritates her. I wish for Megan a rich spiritual life and a sure connection with God, but she will likely have to find it from outside of Mormonism, even as I found it from within.

So there it is, a bleak sunset to Margaret Toscano's brilliant sunrise.

My anguish over these thoughts has been growing over the last couple of years, and I have talked with my good friends in an attempt to find any positive directions that can be pursued from such sad conclusions.

Lavina has said that even though the institutional battle is lost, there is value in individual women living the struggle and telling their stories as many of us have done.

Anne says that the best and brightest always learn that their spiritual connections with God are independent of institutional Mormonism. Therefore, we can pursue spirituality with faith and conviction on our own, which many of us have done.

Carol Lynn says that she has moved beyond the battles of women and the church and that there is clear sky beyond the clouds. She says that, although Mormon women seem to accept the boundaries laid down by "The Brethren," they nonetheless go about making choices outside those boundaries—choices about careers, education, and birth control—not out of a sense of rebellion, but just because these women are sensible and feminism has made it safer for them to choose.

Susan has given me permission to not have a formal church calling, but to design my own calling, one that suits my goals and needs.

Deedee says that the battle for women's rights may be lost in the church, but there is a whole wide world of political and social rights still

to be won for women. She has shifted her energy to a field where there is still some chance for victory.

Becky reminds me that our own sons, at least, approach the women in their lives very differently than they might have without our influence and take more responsibility for their children.

And Alan says there may be hope for the future because many men of our generation have adopted a stance of equality. Eventually, these men will fill high leadership positions if allowed to do so. But it will be too late for Megan and her generation.

I feel that most American women, including Mormon women, benefit from the feminist struggles for equality while neither recognizing nor acknowledging this. They do so every time one of their daughters goes to college on a sports scholarship or they divorce and receive state-mandated child support and a fair share of the assets. Feminist efforts have made headway in the larger society, even gradually affecting Mormon society, but sadly those women who led the way are seldom appreciated for their efforts.

As I wonder where to go now, I am reminded of Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," in which the aged Ulysses gathers his old crew and sails off on his last adventure. He says:

Come, my friends,  
 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
*Push off, and sitting well in order smite*  
 The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
 Of all the western stars, until I die...  
 Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
 We are not now that strength which in old days  
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are:  
 On equal temper of heroic hearts,  
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

"Though much is taken, much abides." We've lost a lot. We have lost our hope in institutional change, and we have lost our church membership, in some cases.

But what is it that abides?

Our faith and our spiritual link to God abide, in or out of the church.

The great cause of mothering abides, whether or not we have children.

And the connections, woman to woman, abide. We care for each other, listen to each other, talk honestly, and work through our cares with each other. This is how women have survived for ages.

Let me quote from Carol Lynn Pearson's poem, "Support Group":

You can fall here.  
We are a quilt set to catch you  
A quilt of women's hands  
Threaded by pain made useful.

With generations of comfort-making  
Behind us, we offer this gift  
Warm as grandma's feather bed  
Sweet as the Heavenly Mother's  
Lullaby song.

You can fall here.  
Woman's hands are strong.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, we have lost the battle. But it is very possible that we have won the only war that counts, in the long run. The sisterhood of women abides and will abide forever both within and outside of the constraints of Mormon culture. As the song says, they can't take that way from us.

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1. Carol Lynn Pearson, *Women I have known and Been* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Book, 1992), 24.